

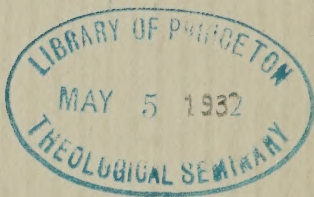
*Constructive
Modernism*

*A Forecast of Final
Valuations in Religion*

LAWRENCE W. NEFF

BT
82
.N44
1926

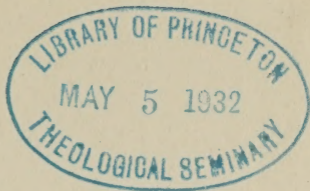
P.T.R.



Division

A

BT 82 .N44 1926
Neff, Lawrence W.
Constructive modernism



✓
Constructive
Modernism

POSITIVE FACTORS *in the* SANEST *and*
STRONGEST SPIRITUAL MOVEMENT
of the CHRISTIAN ERA.

Lawrence W. ^WNeff^{pp}

BANNER PRESS
PRINTERS & PUBLISHERS
EMORY UNIVERSITY, GA.

Copyright 1926 by Lawrence W. Neff
All rights reserved.

FOREWORD

IN THIS brief treatise no effort whatsoever has been made to effect alignment with any specific school of thought or group of propagandists, for reasons stated. Nor is it deemed needful perspicuously to define "Modernism," which, in so far as it possesses abiding import, will be "Ancientism" a thousand years from now, without, however, having suffered any abatement of its native virility. Its present importance consists in the fact that for the first time since the process of slow strangulation was applied in the supposed interest of an authoritative Church and priesthood, earnest men in ever-increasing numbers are highly resolved to rediscover and recover the actual principles of Jesus Christ and give them their first adequate test as the solvent of social, political and economic problems now becoming hazardous to civilization itself, in the meeting or avoidance of which problems the conservative and inspirational resources of conventional religion are suffering obvious collapse. The alternative appears to be Modernism or Nihilism.

UPROOTING

and

REPLANTING

I

IN ITS essence Modernism is the most primitive of all the purer forms of religious faith, resting as it does upon the data of personal experience. Its distinctive concept is that of direct access to God, without resort to mechanical, sacrificial or sacerdotal expedients. Originally it represented the intuitive quest of the reverent spirit for an unseen but all pervading Power, with which some sort of communion was felt to be established. This is best delineated in the earlier portions of the Old Testament narratives, and marks the genesis of spiritual development along experimental lines. In recurring phases it is recognizable in the turning from outward sanctions and constraints to inward impulsions; the protest of luminous souls against the irksome bondage of externals; the ascendancy of ideals living and growing over formularies dead and dying. Latterly it may be taken to denote the repudiation of constituted authority merely as such in behalf of deepened devotion to facts and principles which appear to afford clearer insight into the ultimate meaning of

Constructive Modernism

life and destiny. For these reasons Modernism has ever been manifest less as a form than a force, and properly culminates not so much in a fixed system as a perennial forward-urge.

Thus viewed, the illustrious succession of Modernists is as ancient as the recorded annals of the race, for the reason that in the realm of religion, from the beginning even to the present time, they have done just about all the thinking and writing that was worthy of preservation, save as musty memoirs. Omitting individual examples we may mention collectively the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets, in contrast with their pagan and priestly contemporaries; the Founder of Christianity, relentlessly hounded and crucified by the rigidly righteous as the arch-enemy of the true faith; the leaders of every great moral and spiritual—as contrasted with ecclesiastical—crusade of the Christian era,—each and all of them rightly regarded as inimical to the established order, which forthwith proceeded to crush them to the utmost extent of its ability.

Nor is there substantial ground for mistaking the radical and even revolutionary character of the incipient movement in its present manifestation. Standing self-convicted of rejecting perhaps half the stereotyped tenets of

Uprooting and Replanting

conventional orthodoxy, it adds the yet greater offense of asserting and emphasizing the other half with most objectionable insistence. Its moral ultimata will come with as much of dynamic (*cf.* dynamite) to the respectable orthodoxy of our day as the utterances of Jesus fell upon the dulled ears of his complacent contemporaries. Now, even as then, the unfamiliar truth will become a stumbling-block to multitudes of earnest but misguided souls who, by their traditions, have made the word of God of none effect.

For the upspringing of a firmer faith there must first be a wholesale uprooting of errors and half-truths. This sign is set for the falling and the rising up again of many, and illustrates forcefully the fact that truth itself is the savor of life or death according to the constitution of the mind which perceives it. Jesus himself overturned the unstable faith of a larger number of individuals than any other has ever done. But there has been many centuries of preparation for this return to vital as contrasted with formal fundamentals, and the prediction may be confidently made that after the tumult and the shouting dies—or even as it is in progress—there will be a quiet, almost imperceptible and altogether irresistible

Constructive Modernism

ble return to the truths which are stirring anew the heart of humanity.

Modernism in its present status is largely unsystematized and utterly unorganized. These facts sufficiently attest its spontaneous character. In many and widely scattered fields it is springing up blade by blade, as at the approach of spring, with the far fruition of the harvest season hidden from finite vision. Perhaps the movement will long remain predominantly spontaneous and unorganized, in which event it will afford another interesting and instructive parallel to the Christianity of Jesus Christ, which strikingly magnified the potencies of germination and minified the routine of organization—only to have the process reversed and the perversion perpetuated by his immediate followers, to whose mistakes the Acts and Epistles bear abundant testimony.

As a return to vital sources, Modernism may be confidently counted upon to propagate major principles of growth and relegate minor rules of conduct.

The reproach that Modernists as a group do not maintain close formation is more than half praise. Meticulous consistency is a characteristic vice of small minds operating in narrow compass. The men who have been at grips

Uprooting and Replanting

with great and portentous truths which will powerfully affect the whole future of humanity have not as yet taken the time or trouble to be conspicuously consistent among themselves. Nor did the writers of the narratives which constitute our Bible. Consistency is still well able to take thought of itself and to dispense with cajolery.

Certainly there is no such circumstantial agreement among Modernists as to lend countenance to the oft-heard charge of a dark conspiracy. In fact, one is led to suspect that they are not even keeping prudent watch upon one another. By way of personal confession, I read an average of scarcely one heretical volume in half a dozen years, and give no more than casual notice to any one of the so-called liberal periodicals of the day. The spirit of the time is of significance only as it is related to the spirit of the timeless. Interest attaches more properly and more profoundly to the slow but perceptible and inevitable maturing of divinely implanted truths than to the peculiarities of this or that particular specimen, whether peradventure wheat or tare.

For me the sowing-time extended through more than a decade, beginning and concluding with the reading of a wide variety of books

Constructive Modernism

on religious subjects; embracing also a period of years devoted to the intensive study of technical theology under instructors of unquestionable ability and character, some of them then and afterward under mild suspicion of heresy. With a distinctly scriptural background acquired in an early environment of the traditional type and something of the scientific spirit which comes of peering through the microscope to observe the sequence of physical phenomena, I have been content for some years past to let the seed-truths spring up and grow night and day, I knew not how, bringing forth fruit according to laws of the spiritual harvest.

Very similar to my own has been the experience of a multitude of others who have made the quest of God their controlling incentive. Confidence in the outcome is heightened for me by the consideration that during nearly twenty years of rather intimate association with students preparing for the ministry I have scarcely known one of more than mediocre ability who failed to develop either marked sympathy or a measure of enthusiasm for the tenets of Modernism, as was virtually inevitable. A few I have known to take alarm as soon as they felt the leaven working within

Uprooting and Replanting

their minds, resulting in their speedy departure and sensational tales that infidelity was being taught. One prudent father of my acquaintance succeeded in persuading his son to enter the active ministry immediately upon completing the regular college courses, expressing a deep repugnance for modern ideas of religion and thereby leaving the young man utterly unfitted to deal with them intelligently or effectually. Just here is much or most of the significance of what is termed the revolt of youth, refusing to run from every bogie conjured up in its behalf, and alas! the source of much or most of the irreligion which has resulted from an honest but purely supererogatory choice between new facts and old fallacies.

It would be not impossible, perhaps even not difficult, to enumerate the fundamental principles of constructive Modernism in a dozen or a score of concise statements bearing a general resemblance to the planks of a political platform, but I resist the temptation at present in the hope of clarifying and enforcing them as they arise in the course of orderly discussion, possibly to be epitomized at its conclusion.

THE REQUIREMENT
OF REALITY

II

ONE OF THE TWO inexorable demands which constructive Modernism makes upon the prevalent systems of religious thought is that of rigorous reality, as contrasted with specious superstition, gushing generality or metaphysical meandering. The very first essential of wholesome religion is reality, whereas the peculiar and characteristic curse of tortuous theology has ever been unreality. Obscured in some measure by the dust of current controversy, this fact becomes obvious in the long perspective of history, from the time when fanatical partisans flayed each other figuratively and literally over an iota subscript, indulged in the intellectual gymnastics of scholasticism, presently pounded each other to pulp over the mode of baptism and otherwise proved their religion orthodox by apostolic blows and knocks.

Then end is not yet. My outstanding impression of the preaching of the last thirty-odd years is that of inapplicability to immediate conditions. In the earlier portion of the period mentioned the staples of discussion were the devious deductions of dogmatic theology based for the greater part upon such passages as are found in the earlier chapters of St. Paul's epistle to the Romans, issuing in the

Constructive Modernism

amplification and alleged elucidation of themes entirely orthodox but dead as Adam's brindle ox. Regularly, once a year, during the revival season, the preacher descended to the level of ordinary comprehension, resorted to exhortations and 'rousements, enabling him to report a substantial ingathering of members. At the present time in this section of the country it is all but impossible to find a mature man or woman who professed conversion or joined the church outside of dog-days. With myself it was midsummer campmeeting time, between laying-by and fodder-pulling, after the strictest dictates of orthodoxy.

This was and is the fault of antecedents rather than of the particular individual or group. Ministerial acceptability then as now resided largely, if not chiefly, in the knack of imparting an impression of profundity by dextrous manipulation of high-sounding phrases, buttressing belligerent orthodoxy with ostensibly conclusive scriptural citations and playing upon the erotic emotions with a fine frenzy of impassioned oratory. One of the most melancholy and far from infrequent spectacles is that of the eloquent preacher who fails to get his bottled eloquence successfully uncorked and emits a sermonic fizzle. Needless

The Requirement of Reality

to remark, the profundity rings hollowly, the ostensible orthodoxy often bespeaks intellectual indolence and the lachrymose ebullitions are home-brewed. Such alleged preaching, once generic, now has its habitat chiefly in the South, with steadily diminishing influence. May it diminish increasingly, unless, as one is led to fear, its place is to be taken by the esthetic essays, political polemics and sociological soliloquizings which pass for preaching in some other sections. Either way, most sermons nowadays tend undeviatingly to dullness, and it would appear about equally difficult one place or another to be reasonably assured of hearing a deliverance which might be expected to impart a ripple of intellectual impact, produce a sense of spiritual elevation and fortify moral resolution.

Upon the psychological and ethical reaction of the minister, more often than otherwise a man of lofty motives, it is painful to dwell. Normally the stress may be expected to issue in the type of professionalism which makes this vocation one of the least religious. There is occasion for misgiving and depression in the candid and confidential way in which elderly ministers sometimes speak of the lost radiance of their earlier career, and very often

Constructive Modernism

their silence itself is more revealing than speech. Aiming always at regularity—"tracking the track," as one of them phrased it in my hearing—repeating platitudes, pushing prescribed programs, threshing out the theological straw whose dust has about suffocated spirituality, fostering feeble faith which was never robust enough to doubt, administering soothing syrup instead of iron tonic,— these are exceedingly poor substitutes for proclaiming eternal spiritual verities that make men wise unto salvation.

In sharp contrast with this debilitating course of procedure is the quiet, courageous and properly reverent quest of truth that marks the better manifestation of the spirit of our own time, which is rightly associated with and under weighty obligation to research in the natural sciences, whose subject matter is the handiwork of God himself. The very willingness to follow any assured or predominantly probable clue to its ultimate ascertainable source and culmination is an evidence and actual form of faith in the natural or supernatural order more meritorious than mere blind credulity. If it were indeed necessary, as some of the deluded devotees of decadent orthodoxy have so vociferously affirmed, to

The Requirement of Reality

make definite choice between the two methods of approach to truth, we should hardly be disposed to lament for the feeble hearts and lame brains incidentally lost to the cause of advancement.

Modernism lives in the realm of reality and breathes the pure atmosphere of veracity. It offers hospitality to any and all truth from any and all sources, and makes emphatic denial of the premise that under any condition conceivable or inconceivable one positive truth can in any particular contradict, though it may supersede and displace, another. For it every ascertained fact stands as a landmark upon the eternal thoroughfare of progress, and the timorous throwing of a mantle of concealment over it effects nothing else than the contriving of a perilous stumbling-stone.

Modernism fully shares, and actually anticipated, the conviction which is now making a quick and thorough conquest of scientific thought that the ground of the universe is spiritual rather than material, as so long assumed and blatantly asserted. The supposedly inert, unoriginated and indestructible stuff which is the staple of science has been chased in nympholeptic leaps from planet to sun, from sun to system, thence to constellation, cosmos

Constructive Modernism

and macrocosmos; in the opposite direction through all the successive mazes of molecule, atom, ion, electron and microcosmic surmise to the infinite and eternal energy from which all things proceed, endowed with obvious intelligence, which inevitably means—God. The undevout scientist of today, having first orphaned himself, is at the point of losing all his remaining family.

If, in such spiritual setting, the proper and scientific study of mankind is man, assuredly the fact of paramount interest and importance concerning him must needs be a spiritual fact, which is both the luminous conception of Jesus and the logical contention of Christianity. It follows that a radical change to true correspondence with the spiritual environment is the consummate experience, and this means exactly—conversion. Although there are as many and reliable data concerning this spiritual rebirth as can be marshalled in any field of research, be it said to the everlasting shame of obsolescent science that it has ineptly ignored or openly sneered at spiritual phenomena just as verifiable and now becoming recognized as immeasurably more significant than the most familiar physical phases, thereby both stultifying and discrediting itself and entailing the

The Requirement of Reality

penalty of unscientific bias. Yet every decade has produced men who were at once scientific specialists and spiritual seers, and their tribe steadily increases. In particular, the new psychology is emerging as a notable ally of the new theology.

For the sake of final consistency, if for no other reason, constructive Modernism must increasingly emphasize spiritual values, which implies simply the utmost importance of religion and the utter impotence of mere negation. New and hidden meanings emerge from the pungent and solemn query, "What shall a man be profited if he gain the whole world and lose his own life?" With this stupendous conviction at heart, its votary becomes as the man finding treasure hid in a field, and for joy thereof, going and selling all he has to procure it; or the merchantman seeking goodly pearls, and finding one of great price, surrendering all other possessions to make it his own. Traditionalism, on the other hand, caught a glimpse of the treasure and hastily departed to publish the fact abroad, afterward returning to find it vanished and its own latter state worse than the former. Not more, but vastly less, of consequence attaches to discovery of spiritual truth than to what one subsequently

Constructive Modernism

does about it. The age-long and inescapable indictment of organized religion is wrenched emphasis of values.

Modernism in its better manifestations is simply Traditionalism that has awakened from its troubled slumber at the touch of reality, and has set itself, a bit feverishly it may be, to the task of working out at one and the same time a life and a philosophy of life which are worthy our magnificent opportunity as fellow-workers with God in a redemptive program of illimitable outreach.

The ground of confidence in such truth as it has apprehended, and the only assured hope of continued progress, is found in the assumption and assertion that the human reason has an inherent affinity for and pre-adaptation to truth, much as the lungs and other physical organs exhibit unique prenatal fitness for their several functions. All these forms of activity persist as mere potentialities until, in the fulness of time, they are pushed forward by an invisible urge, which seems to say, "Breathe or suffocate. Think or forfeit the power of thought." All alike are developed and disciplined by proper use, and alike become more fit through right functioning. We steadfastly affirm that the conscious human personality is

The Requirement of Reality

not the waif of chance, marooned upon some remote and uncharted shoal of the cosmos to wander in hopeless bewilderment through deepening darkness to ultimate unmerciful disaster; but that instead it is a legitimate offspring of the Infinite, heir of a glorious inheritance, at home in one of its Father's many mansions, amid an environment infinitely favorable to normal and progressive development, entrusted even now with powers and potencies hazardous far beyond the danger-point if misdirected and yet beneficently prophetic of the eventual attainment of godlike attributes that overreach reason and consign even the most opulent imagination to the poorhouse.

THE REQUIREMENT
OF RIGHTNESS

III

NOT LESS notable than the intellectual quickening since the advent of the scientific method of investigating truth has been the moral and spiritual rebirth under the practical though pitiably inadequate application in all social relationships of the humanistic principles of liberty, fraternity, equality. This has wrought in effect the resurgence of virile Christianity, and gains rather than loses impressiveness by reason of the fact that it emerged most definitely from the lawlessness and bloodshed and militant disbelief which immediately preceded, attended and followed the cataclysm we term the French Revolution. Not less significantly, in its subsequent stages it has prevailed largely outside the fold of organized religion and very often in hostility to it. There is grave reason to fear that a mistaken zeal to avoid the very appearance of evil in this guise may have impelled the Church to embrace and hug to its bosom the reality thereof.

When the human personality has become possessed of the passion for justice and righteousness it is worse than folly to say, "Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther." The only alternative to freedom of intellectual inquiry and supremacy of the moral consciousness is

Constructive Modernism

the bald denial of any place to either and both. Herein the Roman Catholic Church alone is consistent, and it is not surprising that in the quest of spiritual tranquillity many eminent men have been driven to commit both their intellect and conscience to its sovereign custody.

When Martin Luther entered upon his spectacular career he lifted the lid from Pandora's box and smashed it to splinters. Along with the resultant moral revulsion at the saturnalia of licentiousness and covetousness perpetrated and condoned by the papal regime, and logically consequent upon it, was the inference of individual freedom in interpreting the scriptures—a prerogative previously monopolized by a chosen few theologians under the tutelage and imprimatur of Holy Church. That Luther could not always constrain certain other men equally educated and equally conscientious to agree with all his interpretations is not in the least surprising. At any rate he may be written down as the outstanding forerunner of Modernism, and very few Roman Catholics will be found questioning his clear claim to the distinction. But he signally failed to free himself and his following from the consummate doctrinal curse of Christianity,

The Requirement of Rightness

inherited from Paul and Augustine, which task fell to succeeding generations.

John Wesley prided himself upon the scripturalness of his teachings, but in asserting and emphasizing the freedom of the human will and repudiating the monstrous doctrines of election, predestination, foreordination, he went directly counter to the weight of scriptural authority outside the utterances of Jesus himself as recorded in the first three gospels. The plain man who reads the famous passages in the writings of St. Paul, ranking theologian of Christianity, cannot escape the conclusion that he held tenaciously to these tenets, however much he tended to abrogate them in preaching an unlimited atonement; likewise there appears to be little if any question upon the point among the scholars who are most familiar with the documents in the original language. Yet their major premise is an odious insult to the conscience, degrading God to the moral plane of the human father who would bring children into involuntary existence, cast them off cruelly to struggle against impossible odds, force them into careers of crime and then devote all his energies to sending them to the gallows. Rigid Calvinism thus dispenses with the Devil by putting God in his place.

Constructive Modernism

Dr. Samuel Johnson, contemporary of Wesley, declared that commonsense never made any man believe it, and now we may add that a sense of common justice and even decency is enough to make any right-minded man instantly and indignantly reject it, however scriptural. Thirty years ago in the far west I heard the question debated by two ministers, Methodist and Baptist, and the thrill of an utterance quoted, though disapprovingly, by the former has never wholly passed from me: "I beg leave to differ with St. Paul." At the time it startled and even shocked me, but my susceptibility to shock has considerably diminished. At present it appears that only two Protestant denominations of repute in the United States even nominally hold to predestination, all others having expressly repudiated it. These two operate exclusively in the South, and representative men of both communions declare that even here the doctrine is virtually abandoned.

In the same class of rejected teachings we may mention a few of many—such as literal, inerrant and equal inspiration of each and every part of the sixty-six books constituting the Bible; innate depravity of mankind; a legal or mechanistic plan of salvation from eternal pun-

The Requirement of Rightness

ishment; imputed guilt or innocence; various penal and substitutional theories of atonement—with any and all other hypotheses which do violence to moral sanctions and make salvation a quibble or dodge rather than the impartation and nurture of the divine life. For myself, the deliberate decision was reached long years ago, and is since intensified rather than abated, to make the crucial test of any teaching its conformity or disconformity to the promptings of a conscience unreservedly committed to follow divine guidance. Nor could conscience continue to function truly upon any other condition.

The present pitiable plight of the Church, in the eyes of thoughtful and earnest observers, has arisen directly from a settled disposition to compromise as between conscience and expediency. Fearful of requiring any radical departure from conventional attitudes and practices, thereby subjecting its claim of supernatural endowment to a definite test, it has chosen rather to lower its moral and spiritual standards to unobjectionable levels, “putting the bars so low anybody can jump over them,” as the revivalists phrase it. By consenting to make itself conformable it has effectually forfeited its powers to transform. Purposing to

Constructive Modernism

become inclusive, it is only thoroughly inconclusive. Never before in the annals of Christianity were so many persons so well disposed to indorse Jesus Christ or so ill disposed to follow him. Never were there so many who said "Yes" with their lips and "No" with their lives. Never were so many of the same members in good standing in both the Church and the penitentiary, despite their uncanny cleverness in evading the latter. Organized religion never had more of fuss or less of force than at the present time.

Modernism increasingly rejects and repudiates the type of engrafted piety which brings forth upon its various branches all manner of fruit, good and evil. In its contemplation the spiritual laws which are revealed as subsisting in our relationships to God—no less real and operative than those which hold planets in their ordered orbits—are the patterns of lesser laws which pervade with beneficent sway every relationship of man to man, whether political, economic, social, or other; and no access or excess of fervor in hymns and prayers wafted heavenward can suffice for the lack of common honesty and humane liberality exercised earthward. The pull of the Golden Rule is deemed

The Requirement of Rightness

ultimately as inescapable as the pull of gravitation.

As in the former dilemma relating to the reliability or unreliability of the human reason, we reach the analogous conclusion that while the conscience is primarily a mere bundle of potencies awaiting development and direction, eventually it becomes the sole and sufficient arbiter of spiritual values for the individual. Apart from its monitions one may formally assent to or dissent from any moral proposition, but such act is extraneous and has no other effect than to produce confusion worse confounded. Upon the particular point this position is in essential accord with the teaching of the Quakers concerning the "inner light," and the remark is heard with increasingly frequency that this group is more nearly than any other representative of the religion of the future.

Illuminism is based upon the hypothesis, substantiated to the complete satisfaction of many, including myself, that conscience is bestowed by the Creator, possessing inherent affinity and pre-adaption for perceiving moral verities no less naturally than the bodily organs function and the reason operates in its proper sphere. Very similarly conscience is first man-

Constructive Modernism

ifested through potencies, pushed forward by an invisible force, increasingly directed by free personality toward right or wrong development, which former result is worth the whole soul's tasking and which latter is tragedy unspeakable. It follows that in the functioning of conscience idle curiosity is an insult and indifference a crime. Acute sensibility to good and evil corresponds to the fluctuations of a delicate instrument for measurement of weight, space or time, and is equally amenable to abuse and deterioration. In daily affairs of life it is the one unfailing monitor, and in the form of profound convictions of right and wrong provides the real groundwork of practical religion, quite apart from creed. It is a bit surprising how religiously many persons live with atrocious theological dogmas, which phenomenon bears testimony to the fact that moral verities are self-attesting and normally dominant.

These and many other considerations warrant the inference, which Modernism frankly accepts and confidently asserts in contravention of Traditionalism, that mankind is not fallen but ascending—not disallowed or disinherited of God, but slowly and painfully led onward, with many stumblings and backslidings, into

the glorious liberty of perfect sonship. It affirms that religion, being innate, will grow up naturally in the heart if it is not crushed into deformity, in which event it will continue to grow unnaturally; that the religion of Jesus Christ, given to help lift a rising race, impresses no alien influence upon human nature, but instead supplements its normal powers, being ideally adapted thereto and perfectly articulated therewith; that the habitual attitude and individual act of reverent obedience opens the windows of the soul just as surely as disobedience closes them; that the heaven within and the heaven yet to be are alike dependent upon right relationship to salutary environment, whereas wilful maladjustment begun here and logically projected into the hereafter if conscious identity is to persist augurs a hotter hell than Dante or Jonathan Edwards ever imagined.

SCRIPTURAL

MODERNISM

IV

IF MODERNISM should ever attempt to displace or destroy the Bible it would tacitly make all needful preparation for its own obsequies. With equal wisdom a locomotive engineer would engage in a conspiracy to undermine the mighty bridge upon which his train was expected to cross a mountain gorge. The present state of nervous tension among nearly all classes of passengers bound for the promised land is due chiefly to the apprehension that the few Modernists on board entertain overt designs upon the celestial causeway, while the latter group assert merely that their fellow-travelers insist upon making a permanent sojourn thereupon, instead of passing onward to the sweet fields beyond the swelling flood.

Almost any constructive Modernist would assent cheerfully to the dictum propounded in the opening sentence of the Epistle to the Hebrews—the one and only explicit and comprehensive statement of the character and scope of divine revelation to be found in all the scriptures—that God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, has at the end of these days spoken unto us through his Son. As a graphic delineation of the pro-

Constructive Modernism

cess of partial and progressive revelation under widely diverse conditions—the measure of the revelation being limited always and only by the receptivity of the human agent—culminating in the perfect revelation of Jesus Christ, made possible by his perfect receptivity and responsiveness, this passage would be very difficult of improvement.

Viewed simply and sympathetically as a trustworthy record of the spiritual experiences of those who have sought and found God more truly than any others have done, and to whom God revealed himself in the fullest measure of their knowledge and capability, subject also to all their existing limitations of every description, the Bible is beyond all comparison the most priceless volume in the possession of the race—a treasure-trove of truth without which we would soon revert to spiritual pauperism. It is therefore deserving of the most undivided attention and vigorous thinking which we can bestow upon it, with no place, however, for the false valuation and ignorant veneration so generally elicited, whether through devious design or mere intellectual inertia.

In addition to declaring the loftiest spiritual principles mankind has ever known, and

illustrating the manner of their operation in the pulsing life of those sanguine souls who now aspired and now yielded to insidious temptation, walking sometimes in the gorge of gloom and anon upon the heaven-kissing hills,—apart from exhibiting all this with an artlessness beyond art and a convincingness that forestalls attempted proof, the Bible embodies in many portions direct revelations of the essential nature of God and man of which no more than the faintest intimations have ever come through any other medium of history or literature. At its very threshold, in the gray morning light of history, we are startled by the audacious announcement of the inherent kinship and spiritual likeness of the human and the divine. A millennium afterward, in the midst of the earlier dispensation, we find the depiction of man as made but little lower than God—not the angels, as erroneously translated—and crowned with glory and honor. At the consummation we look upon Jesus exalting the unspoiled humanness of childhood as the fittest earthly type of heavenly-mindedness, and in answer to the charge of blasphemy declaring (John 10:34) the essential divinity of humanity. Throughout the greater portion of the scriptures the dominant

Constructive Modernism

motivation is that men shall make actual and present their potentially divine sonship. A more inspired or inspiring summons could not be conceived, and to suppose either that it shall be outgrown or shall ever fail to awaken the ardent enthusiasm of nobler souls is about equally gratuitous and absurd.

Revelation emerges even more clearly in the reading of the scriptures than in the writing, upon a principle somewhat analogous to that which identifies the phenomena of sight and sound not with the agency from which they appear to proceed, but with the eye and ear that function in response to the respective stimuli. If the tenets of faith be conceived as once for all delivered unto the saints now deceased, it was for the express purpose of being apprehended increasingly by those coming after them. Revelation is degraded if it be understood as anything less than deep calling unto deep—the actually infinite communicating itself to the potentially infinite.

It is no less true now than when written nearly twenty centuries ago that the letter of the scripture kills and the spirit of the scripture imparts spiritual life. Given to men as a clue to guide them through the labyrinthine maze of ignorance and immaturity to fuller

knowledge and larger liberty, the same scriptures are capable of being made, and in fact are more often than otherwise made, a bond which fetters the spirit in darkness. One might even encounter some difficulty in differentiating between the present excessive veneration of our spiritual forefathers, the usually holy men of old through whom God spoke in the divers portions and manners aforementioned, and the veneration of physical ancestors which stamps the Chinese people as pagans.

The quest of God in the Bible is a subtle form of idolatry; the quest of God through and beyond the medium of the experiences of other men as reliably recorded in the Bible is at once reasonable and scientific, provided we observe the same reactions in ourselves as they report having found. It follows that their chief if not sole value for us is in their likeness rather than their unlikeness to ourselves. This is pre-eminently true of Jesus Christ, though the emphasis has been shifted all but invariably to the superhuman valuations of his personality, despite his favorite and habitual characterization of himself as the son of man, which would plainly appear to anticipate and counteract this very tendency.

Constructive Modernism

Concerning the future appraisal of the Bible and estimate of its authority by the constructive Modernist a few trenchant statements may be made, without present opportunity to discuss or defend them:

He will rely implicitly upon those teachings which can be verified in his own experience, and no other.

He will staunchly refrain from accepting as true anything therein which he would feel compelled to reject elsewhere.

He will steadfastly believe that God is just as ready to reveal himself to his waiting children as he has ever been; that the only conclusive evidence of his having ever spoken to men is that he still speaks to them; that the word of God to the individual is final for the individual.

CHRISTIAN

MODERNISM

V

EVENTUALLY Modernism will stand and would fall with Jesus Christ. The speediest and surest method of determining its own destiny is to stake everything upon him—not upon his deity, which, however true, is a metaphysical abstraction eluding finite grasp and defying even definition; nor upon his mysterious control of the forces of nature, which is about equally a help and a hindrance to understanding his character and mission—but instead upon the perfection of the personality of Jesus himself, who becomes to us immeasurably more than prodigy or sign; who makes all other recorded miracles credible but trivial; who, bearing his own witness within the soul, imparting the benediction of his own present blessedness and the perennial power of triumphant living, throws all hearsay evidence out of court as incompetent, irrelevant and immaterial.

Traditionalists, miscalling themselves Fundamentalists, despite their fine facility in missing all the final fundamentals, through the centuries have made the momentously melancholy blunder of resting their cause upon external evidences—more specifically the infallibility of the scriptures and the authority of the Church, each in turn representing a progressive de-

Constructive Modernism

clension from the proper plane of spiritual certitude.

Upon the former point it may be confidently asserted that their emphasis is as obviously wrenched as their fears are fatuous. The foundations that rest upon sand cannot be stabilized by their most frantic efforts, and those that rest upon the rock stand in no need of their puny props. The truths and values that are as a city set upon a hill can not be hidden and exclude exploitation. Much as a gigantic redwood towers above a scrub-oak thicket, the essential truths are superior to their incidental setting, and most of all the incarnate Truth overtops the four fragmentary narratives of that marvelous career which have come down to us from uncertain sources, as copies of other lost copies, translations of translations, spoken in one language, written in another and read in still others, without antecedent, date, signature or other authentication than the altogether unique character of their contents, which of itself alone validates the first three, at least. There is the added evidence of the labors and the letters of Saint Paul, which have of their own virility disarmed criticism and disbelief, though with no warrant

for the extravagant veneration which at Lystra the Apostle himself so vehemently disavowed.

Reposing upon no such flimsy foundation, but providentially placed beyond the reach of chance and change, the claims of Christianity are supported by two distinct, credible and converging lines of testimony which may be confidently counted upon to defy any future critical or scientific impeachment: First, their historical background, involving the necessity of conceding and the psychological absurdity of denying that Jesus Christ and Saul of Tarsus, to mention no others, are more surely historical personages than Oliver Cromwell and George Washington; second, their abiding power, in that the outstanding principles then proclaimed and applied, with their attendant phenomena, have been and may be abundantly verified in every generation down to the present, and by each and every individual who will test them fairly, with less of room for error and smaller need of conjecture than any known or suspected physical facts.

With reference to the Church as the supposed dispenser of gifts and graces, as it has been and is now in contrast with what it was designed and empowered to be, one who is in the most cordial sympathy with its proper

Constructive Modernism

work must needs speak in words of deeper sorrow than the wail above the dead. Having definitely shifted, almost before the fires of Pentecost ceased to burn, from the realm of the spiritual to that of the formal, with nothing more than rare sporadic efforts to regain its lost glory, the Church has long been and is now a congeries of contradictions, collectively incapable of receiving or utilizing any endowment of consequence, yet comprising in its individual aspects about all that is worth while in the sphere of human betterment. With its ludicrous and pernicious conception, traceable to priestly influences, of two different classes of adherents, represented respectively by the ministry and laity, one active and the other passive, with different stages and standards of morality—all this in sharp contrast with the clear individual summons of Jesus, himself a layman, to seek the kingdom of God before all else—it is truly a spectacle to make angels weep and disbelievers blaspheme. And now, the very heathen, wiser in their generation than the children of light, have begun to draw the clear and unmistakable distinction between Christianity and Christ which his professed followers have so stupidly and purposely ignored.

Changeless in the midst of change, above fetid fog and moral miasma and all the more transcendent because of them, the commanding and spiritually irresistible figure of Jesus Christ is emerging to the view of myriad eyes long beclouded and peering wistfully for fuller unveiling. And in him the two indicated demands of constructive Modernism are adequately and abundantly met.

Jesus Christ incarnates reality. No act or gesture or word of intimation of the artificial or theatrical in any degree attaches to his personality. He faced the physical facts of suffering and death with never a denial of their verity but instead an assertion and demonstration of other facts which embraced and overreached them. In dealing with spiritual problems, where theology has been always most deviously confusing he was most crystal clear. Sin and selfishness were realities, but goodness and sacrificial love had power to overcome them. Mankind in general and the punctilious churchmen of his day in particular were lost as sheep not having a shepherd, though not "lost" in the distorted significance of Traditionalism; he pitied them and pointed out the plain path which a wayfaring man though a fool need never miss.

Constructive Modernism

Of his exemplification of the quality of rightness it would appear all but impertinent to speak. His critics and detractors have searched as vainly as diligently for any flaw or foible, and his earnest followers have found riches of joy unfathomable. To walk with him, even stumblingly, is to walk away from sin and selfishness. To become like him is ultimate attainment, for the measure of any virtue is its Christlikeness. To gain his earthly point of view is to achieve triumph out of tragedy, peace out of pain, sight out of blindness and purity out of a stain. To catch the resplendent sublimity of his calm survey of the eternal is to know and share the power of the endless life.

Constructive Modernism—and with it the Eventual Church—has before it the one definite task of apprehending and exemplifying more truly the spirit of Jesus Christ than has been done before. So only will it serve God in service to his other children.

Princeton Theological Seminary Libraries



1 1012 01235 5105

